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Family, solidarities, services and market economy

Over the last decades, there is a recurrent question in social sciences concerning the role of family ties and kinship networks within industrial societies. Despite the announcement of the decline of kinship made by Parsons, social research during the last decades showed the persistence of exchanges between family and kinship members within capitalist societies. Not only the nuclear family has kept exchanging money and services with the members of the kinship network but these exchanges seem to have an important place in the informal economy. The extended commodification of services that were previously provided exclusively by the family along with the crisis of the welfare state, have put family exchanges and solidarities in a new perspective.

This paper aims to discuss the differences between the services provided by the family in contrast with those offered by the market and examines their role within a market economy. It seems that the exchanges, solidarities and services (such as caring, money transfers or domestic labour) that take place within the family are of different nature in comparison with their substitutes provided by the market. Their gratuity, polyvalence and plasticity help the family members to cope with protection and social insertion issues in a more confident context. Though their economic importance within the capitalist economy cannot be ignored, these exchanges, as part of complex family interactions and strategies in a longitudinal perspective, obey gift-exchange principles rather than a pure economic rationale; the obligation for reciprocity is dissimulated behind family interest. Moreover, class belonging is of particular significance here; exchange practices takes different form and meaning along different social classes, varying from the traditional familialistic models of lower classes to the selective strategies of classes possessing a stronger social capital.